

Paper code: DIXO6094

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University students' perceptions of workload: The challenges and vagaries of assessment.

ABSTRACT - Evaluating the academic performance of university students is a problematic area which frequently highlights differences in perspective between students and lecturers. Adult learning and motivation theories, Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive processing and the principles of sound undergraduate education informed the theoretical framework for this study. This study explored university students' concerns with workload and assessment. This research bridges quantitative and qualitative methodology utilising student questionnaires and in-depth focus group interviews. The questionnaire data encompassed over 104,000 individual student responses over a period of six years and were analysed using statistical qualitative software. Four separate focus group interviews were conducted with first, second and third year students to expand on, and explore in-depth students' insights on issues that had emerged from the questionnaire data. Students indicated that workload was a significant issue in balancing studies, work and other responsibilities in their lives. Assessment was identified as highly problematic, in that, requirements were frequently vague with few marking guidelines and little or no feedback being provided to inform progress. Group assignments were over-utilised in their curriculum and were frequently poorly structured and monitored. They reported dissatisfaction with 'social loafers' within groups, peers who had poor communication skills, and with the considerable time required for group activities. The over emphasis on memorisation with low cognitive assessment tasks resulted in boredom and dissatisfaction. The lessons learned from this study provide insights to professional developers within the university context. This research is part of larger study focused on supporting positive educational changes within the university context and is of particular relevance due to the ongoing demands for increasing the quality of teaching and learning.

Introduction

Universities in Australia are increasingly aware of the importance of teaching and learning due to the inception of the Carrick Institute which is now funding this teaching-oriented research and development agenda. Although most universities have previously had professional development programs and a range of support for academics to assist with improving teaching and learning, much of this support has not been taken seriously, resulting in poor engagement. Hence professional developers and administrators are reviewing their initiatives with the view to embedding a more systematic ongoing cycle for teaching and learning development. This has brought student feedback mechanisms such as questionnaires into focus as a key source of data to inform these ongoing developmental cycles; however the literature has highlighted that using just student feedback as the only tool is risky and potentially flawed. The key to ongoing support for academics, students and the organisation is to adopt multifaceted approach to improving teaching and learning quality within the higher education setting.

Purpose of the Research

This study follows on from a long term project that has explored the validity of student feedback data, the professional development that was established to support academics to make sense of their student feedback, and is now focusing on teasing out specific issues that the quantitative data has identified as key areas of concern to students in their studies. This paper outlines the quantitative data that pointed to workload and assessment as significant issues requiring further information. To explore workload and assessment in more rich detail, focus groups were established to specifically

investigate what students' problems and constructive suggestions were. These data have been valuable in informing not only the Business School, but have also been used to inform whole-university processes, policies and practices as they too have similar results in their student feedback. A whole-university committee has been formed to explore ways to address the issues of too heavy workload and poor assessment practices.

Literature review

There is little doubt that the tertiary sector is experiencing an increasing emphasis by governments on ensuring the quality of university teaching within Australia and overseas. This trend will continue and universities need to find reliable and efficient ways of evaluating and enhancing teaching effectiveness. Amongst the changes occurring in Australian higher education, a greater emphasis has been placed on the state universities to perceive themselves as members of a more federally oriented system. The abolition of the binary divide between the university and college sectors reflects the broader roles of each and a more heterogeneous student population. The focus on the quality of teaching in tertiary institutions is part of more explicit and stringent accountability procedures and attempts to highlight excellence in teaching rather than adequacy. According to Lally and Myhill (1994), problems exist in both developing appropriate operational definitions of effective teaching/learning and in developing valid and reliable instruments for assessing teaching/learning. The process of assessing teaching raises a number of difficult issues; however, the appropriateness of the teaching evaluation itself depends upon a number of factors including the purpose of the evaluation, academic staff members' personal philosophies of teaching, concepts of good teaching, and the contexts in which the teaching takes place.

Government pressure for accountability in these matters is now more overt with funding incentives for compliance included within these reform agendas. As Ramsden (2003, p.211) stated "[e]valuation for accountability has become an essential part of today's university ... The days when students' experiences and comparability of standards were in the background and unprofessional teaching behaviour was quietly tolerated have gone". Increasingly, universities are being encouraged to focus on students' learning rather than on teaching alone, with many exploring feedback mechanisms which focus more on students' perception of the learning that occurred rather than what the teacher/lecturer did. The Australian University which is the focus of this research is situated within an increasingly competitive context. The environment for tertiary education is one in which "prospective students are focusing on course quality and likely employment outcomes in making their selection" (Ronayne, 1999, p.8).

The literature indicates that performance indicators in higher education in relation to quality teaching began to be developed in the early 1990s. Feedback has usually taken the format of students' ratings on their level of satisfaction or self reports on attitudes towards teachers or course units of study. North American institutions seem to have accepted this as a routine event. It has been described by some as a ritual and as a result is not considered a very serious process. It would appear that when student feedback procedures are seen to permeate tertiary teaching cultures to the point of overuse they fail to be considered by some as terribly useful (Abrami et al., 1996). The very nature of the embedded process and the relentless regularity impacts on the seriousness of completing such paperwork.

In North America, the United Kingdom, and increasingly so in Australia, the practice of obtaining widespread feedback on higher education teaching is well embedded. Marsh and Dunkin (1992), identified a clear purpose for collecting students' evaluations of teaching (SETs). Student evaluations were seen to provide diagnostic feedback to teachers regarding their effectiveness in the classroom as well as measuring effectiveness of teaching strategies and practices for administrative purposes. The evaluations could also prove useful to students when selecting preferred courses and

the information gathered could potentially provide outcome descriptions which could be relevant for research on teaching.

Marsh's (1982) Students' Evaluation of Educational Quality (SEEQ) is the instrument which seems to have been most widely used. It has been adapted and utilised in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and Spain (Marsh, 1981, 1986; Clarkson 1984; Marsh et al, 1985; Marsh & Roche, 1992). A trial conducted by Curtin University of Technology Teaching Learning Group (1997) confirmed that the SEEQ was far more acceptable than other in-house instruments. The SEEQ requires that students complete thirty five statements based on their perceptions of their teacher and the course materials and presentation. It is however perceived to have its limitations in that it presents student evaluations as a reflection of the teacher taking the unit of study and not on the actual unit itself. The results are therefore a function of the students' reactions and attitudes towards a particular teacher and not the materials. Interestingly, Roche and Marsh (2002) found that teachers' perceptions became consistent with student feedback over time. Student evaluations can change the self-perceptions of teachers so that they see themselves through their students' eyes. This does not necessarily lead however to a change in teacher behaviours. Greenwald and Gilmore (1997, a, b) found that the relationship between SETs and academic performance is stronger when students know their final grades. Their research indicated that students can acquire expectations about their final grades from the results of mid-term tests. They argued that students reduced their workload to achieve original aspirations when faced with lenient assessment on mid-term tests. This research indicates that SETs may be biased by the effects of other external factors. This results in a level of scepticism in relation to using SETs to reflect teacher skill and ability in higher education. Marsh (1987) found that other factors such as student expectations of attaining successful grades and their perception of the workload involved in each unit of study impacted upon the results of the evaluation of teacher performance.

The dominant focus in the UK and Australia with regard to student perceptions of academic quality has been a program of study rather than an individual course unit or whole organisation approach. Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) developed the Course Perceptions Questionnaire (CPQ) to measure the experiences of students in particular degree programs. The CPQ was organised as a research instrument to gather data regarding students' perceptions of degree programs. Ramsden and Entwistle (1981) were able to use it to reveal students' approaches to learning and the contextual factors which had an impact upon these approaches. The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) was trialled during the early 1990s and since then has been modified to provide measurement opportunities regarding the employability of graduates. With a few minor exceptions (Bloomfield & Bligh, 1998; Ainley, 1999; Richardson, 1997) the CEQ has been widely accepted as a reliable and valid instrument for gaining student feedback. Johnson et al. (1996) however have called into question the appropriateness of some items in the case of respondents who had completed a program through research and not units of study. As a result an alternative instrument, the Postgraduate Experience Questionnaire was developed (Johnson, 1999) and is now used across the Australian university system. Marsh et al. (2002) have commented that the instrument is lacking in that it does not discriminate among different universities or among different disciplines at the same university. As a result it remains in doubt whether the results can be used to benchmark universities or disciplines within universities. Richardson (2005) indicates that as with students' evaluations of teaching, there is little evidence that the collection of student feedback using the CEQ, in itself, leads to improvement in the perceived quality of programs of study.

It is possible however that student scores on the CEQ potentially assist in the process of course development but only if a systematic process is adopted by the institution where consultation and counselling occur as part of an intervention strategy aimed at specifically improving the quality of teaching and learning in higher education (Gregory, 1994, 1995). While the literature appears to support the notion that student feedback provides important evidence for assessing quality and can

be used to support systematic approaches to improving teaching and learning quality in higher education, students and teachers believe that many do not take it sufficiently seriously. The results of such evaluations of teaching and learning need to be made readily available to all stakeholders and needs to be analysed and reported in the context of continuous improvement which includes academic professional development.

The calls for increased accountability resulting in the requirement of systematic evaluation of learning and teaching quality have not been unreservedly embraced by all academics. Critics of 'students' evaluation of teaching' approaches argue that students are incapable of recognising effective teaching until after graduation in situations where they are called upon to demonstrate their learning. Some academics also feel strongly that the majority of students are not yet adult learners, able to appropriately identify what supports their learning (Marsh, 1987; Centra, 1979, 1989). Frequently universities collect 'students' evaluation of teaching' data but fail to utilise these data in order to make decisions regarding the quality of learning and teaching. Additionally, universities that systematically collect 'students' evaluation of teaching' data frequently fail to keep a longitudinal archive of the results and as a consequence, little use is made of these data.

A growing cynicism by academics towards the overuse of student evaluation data is emerging. Johnson (2000) posits that the use of such evaluative information is indicative of the power of statutory agencies to externally scrutinise the institutional management procedures of universities. The over-reliance by the UK government to utilise student feedback in order to monitor and control educational provision is seen to provide the machinery for ongoing intrusive regulation of higher education. According to Johnson (2000) the current overt pursuit for teaching 'quality' as sought by governments through policy and funding links represents a lack of trust in the academic profession. Trow (1993) indicated that it undermines the authority of academic expertise. The research indicates a growing cynicism on the part of academics regarding the push by governments to seemingly enhance teaching quality in higher education through ongoing evaluation of student feedback. The process of universities in Australia adopting corporate forms of work organisation began in earnest in the late 1990s under the guise of quality assurance mechanisms (Taylor et al., 1998, Winter & Sarros, 2001) 'Quality' involves the rhetoric of empowerment, efficiency and service and diverts attention from its own implication in the operation of mechanisms that serve powerful interests. The authority of the student evaluation questionnaire in its various forms is contingent upon its contemporary policy context which would appear to be commensurate with the politically motivated concept of the purpose, organisation and management of higher education. Student evaluation questionnaires serve the purposes of internal institutional management at a time when government interest in and beliefs about the overall purpose of higher education are driven by a pre-determined agenda centred upon financial viability and a limited view of the relationship between students and learning opportunities. According to Johnson (2000) the major flaw associated with this over-reliance of student evaluation data is that in their current form these processes do not allow students and lecturers to discuss, evidence, explain, negotiate or gain insights into their own or the other's values and assumptions about quality teaching. In this way they de-value the subjective quality of personal opinion and experience and promote the belief that 'teaching' is a single phenomenon that can only be identified by a set of discrete elements and characteristics.

Theoretical framework

When presenting a pros and cons perspective from the literature on obtaining 'student evaluations on teaching' it becomes clear that a more comprehensive, and educationally sound, approach is required when establishing ongoing developmental strategies to enhance teaching and learning. Identifying effective professional development processes that support transfer of strategies and changes in conceptions of learning by academics, teachers or indeed any adult learner has been the

subject of considerable research for many years. The rationale for professional development programs has widened from merely perceiving the 'teacher' as deficit in knowledge and skills to one which incorporates the need to have an impact on increasing learning outcomes for students and on having a positive effect on the organisational culture of the institution (Joyce, & Showers, 1995; Ramsden, & Martin, 1996; Webb, 1996; Fullan, 2001). Research focused on school teachers has identified that while constructivist learner-centred activities are promoted for students the same is often denied adult educators in their ongoing learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2000). Hence there has been increasing attention on ensuring that professional development programs are structured to facilitate collegial discussions on educational matters (philosophies, theories and conceptions of learning, innovations in practices and strategies and so on); provide opportunities to observe and participate in innovative and interactive strategies; share curriculum and assessment development and refinement; and share ideas and learn from others (Webb, 1996; Alberta Teachers' Association, 2001). Professional development which has this type of ongoing "learning communities" focus is therefore considered to be a highly effective process in promoting quality teaching and learning within an educationally focused institution (Scott, 2002).

Many researchers and educational leaders have become increasingly concerned about establishing effective professional staff development programs for lecturers both full time and sessional in order to promote good teaching within higher education (Webb, 1996; Galbraith, 1998; Ramsden, 2003). Professional development within higher education has been, and in many cases still is, poorly funded, and/or marginalized and has rarely been systemised (Ramsden et al, 1995). As a result, the opportunities for lecturers to engage in sound adult learning orientated professional development and teaching-related action research has been infrequent, low profile and not viewed as a 'research' priority outside of the Humanities areas (Webb, 1996; Ramsden et al, 1995). Ongoing and comprehensive professional development for academic staff is a key element of such an approach. Acknowledging that student feedback questionnaires are here to stay, it is crucial that professional developers and administrators use these mechanisms judiciously and within a holistic approach to providing the organisation with a 'learning how to learn' context. A systematic cycle of learning and professional development for staff must have at its core the intention of increasing the quality of student learning experiences. The student-focused model for professional development that is presented in figure 1 has been developed as part of the wider study to essentially support student learning. The model includes the components of student feedback, program review, professional development workshops and articulation into formal teaching qualifications for staff and individual and team-based support in situ. This paper presents the data from the student questionnaire, followed up by in-depth, richer insights into key problems through focus groups, with the view to feeding these insights back into the systematic cycle that has been established via the multidimensional professional development model. The model for professional development aims to focus the attention of the university system and the individual schools within it on the importance of student learning to any staff development initiative.

Theoretical framework

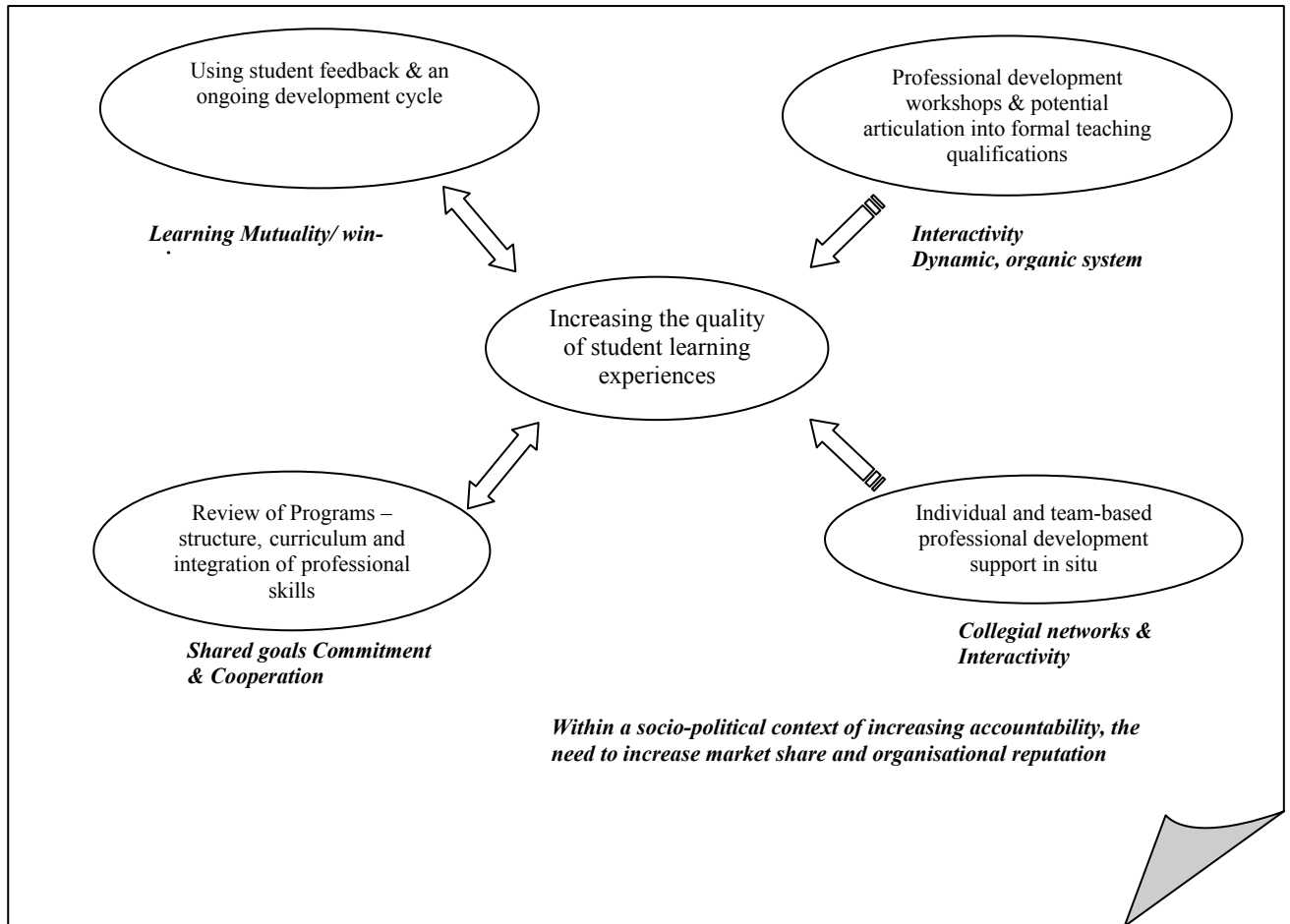


Figure 1: A student-focused model for multidimensional professional development in a university context.

Method

This study was aligned with both the normative and interpretive paradigms. It bridged qualitative and quantitative methodology and involved questionnaires and in-depth focus group interviews using a semi-structured interview schedule. The surveys were undertaken with students in the Business discipline over a period of six years.

Quantitative data

The unit effectiveness project was established in the year 2000 to provide academics and administrators in the areas of Business with systematic student feedback on the unit and teaching. This program utilised the Unit Experience Questionnaire (UEQ) which was superficially modified from an Australian benchmarked instrument, the Course Experience Questionnaire. The process associated with the administration of the instrument was designed to be a developmental approach to improving teaching and learning, unit materials, and assessment processes. The UEQ data were routinely collected in weeks 9, 10 and 11 in each semester (two semesters in each academic year) by independent administrators. Administration of the survey was done in tutorial groups with students being requested to address their responses on their tutor in the rating-type questions; however, they were able to report on the 'lecturer' and or 'unit controller' in the open-ended response sections. The response rate in each year was steady at approximately 70%. Figure 2 displays the percent agreement (including 'agree' and 'strongly agree') for each scale in the questionnaire. The scales included in the instrument are "good teaching", "clear goals and standards", "appropriate workload", "appropriate assessment", and generic skills, with a final item that explores the students' "overall satisfaction with the quality of the unit". Overall, the data set included 104,000 individual student questionnaire responses.

The UEQ data presented in this article were an aggregate of all units* across the seven areas which comprise the Business School in this study. The individual areas represented the disciplines of management, marketing, business law, accounting, economics and finance, and information systems. The authors acknowledge that it is recommended that the CEQ data (which was the derivative instrument) are generally discipline specific and that it is inappropriate to compare student ratings across different disciplines, however, in this article the data are not being used to make judgements about teachers in different disciplines (Hand & Trembath, 1998). These aggregated data are being used to identify key aspects that need to be targeted for curriculum and assessment review and development of more effective learning experiences for students. Comparing discipline-specific data is not within the scope of this paper. As there was no uniform instrument across the entire university that is used for review and development of curriculum and practices, these data were used to provide pointers to inform our work in student assessment and workload issues. The data demonstrates similar trends to the university's overall CEQ particularly in relation to workload and assessment scales.

**a "unit" is defined as a course or unit of study. Students undertake four 'units' in a semester as a full time study load.*

Qualitative data - Student focus group interviews

The selected approach for interviewing the student sample was based upon the work and recommendations of Oppenheim (2001) and followed the procedures necessary for free-style interviews or focus groups. The sample was randomly selected and comprised twenty first year, second year and third year students. The students were divided into sub-groups of ten each in order to facilitate a relaxed and open discussion. Students represented the seven areas of the Business School. Transcripts of the data were content analysed for frequency of response and emerging themes.

The focus group interviews were conducted to expand on, and explore in-depth students' insights on issues that had emerged from the questionnaire data. The focus groups were facilitated by three academic researchers. Two were from Humanities and one from the Business area. The researchers interviewed students from outside their teaching areas. This was deemed essential by the research

team as these staff could enter the focus group environment without pre-conceived attitudes towards the teaching and learning processes currently engaged in by lecturing staff in each area. The involvement of these staff ensured an unbiased approach at all times to the determination of the emergent themes as they occurred throughout the process. It was also assured that the researchers would have no prior relationship with the potential students in the sample which may lead to biased interaction with the focus groups.

Results of the study

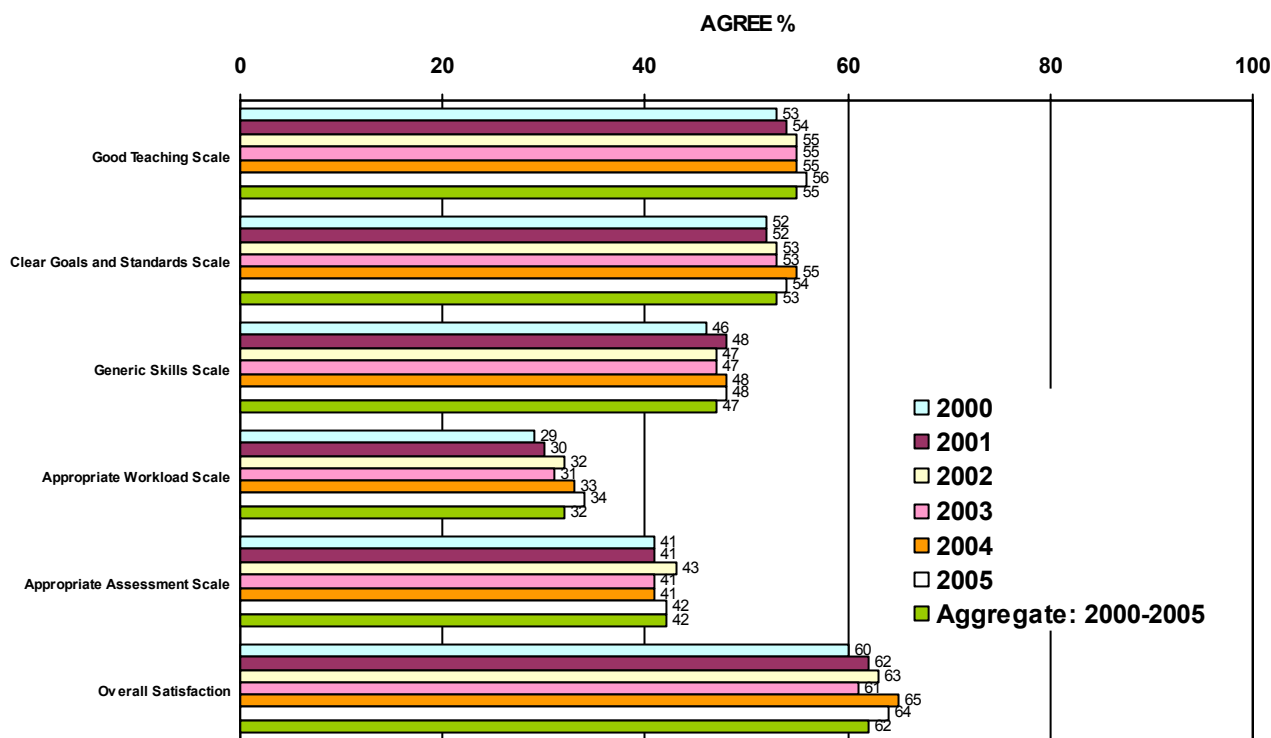


Figure 1: Longitudinal (5 years) Unit Experience Questionnaire data (the Business areas).

This paper explores the workload and assessment scales, specifically, as the overall data have been previously investigated and published in other works by the same authors.

Appropriate workload

The “appropriate workload” scale explores students’ perceptions of the amount of pressure they were under in completing the requirement of the unit. There are three negatively worded items in this scale. This was the lowest performing scale in this instrument, with under a third of the students (32%) agreeing that they had sufficient time, and did not feel pressured to get through the unit. Students reported that there was “too much content to thoroughly comprehend in the short time frame”. Students indicated they had difficulty “coping with the heavy workloads”.

Appropriate assessment

The “appropriate assessment” scale explores students’ perceptions of the cognitive demand required in their assessment tasks. Similar to the workload scale, there were three negatively worded items in this scale. Students who agreed/strongly agreed with the items were in the minority (42%). Students identified problems with the “assessment structure[s]” and “allocation of marks”. There appeared to be concerns with parity between tutorial groups, particularly in large units with multiple sessions. Clearly from the consistency of the data across the five years, the university needed to address issues of workload and assessment which students were indicating as problematic.

The open ended sections of the questionnaire provided information to inform the questions for the focus groups. Aspects that were to be further explored included what were the expectations on students by academics; were materials and resources in units explicit enough to streamline students' assessment, preparation, and study time; and what were their perceptions of group work and other assignments.

Student focus groups

Students in the focus groups indicated they were quite comfortable to discuss their concerns about workload and assessment, particularly if these data were going to be used to make changes to programs. They were keen to talk at length about their studies and perspectives especially to academics who were not within their field of study.

Relationships with teaching staff

Students indicated there was an overall need for improved communication between tutors, lecturers and students. Students displayed a mixed response about their lecturers with some stating that their teachers were highly expert, interesting, and responsive whilst others felt that their lecturers were boring, disinterested, and actually disliked them as students. First years were relatively happy with the level of support provided to them by their teachers; however, emphatic responses from the third year students in particular, suggested that there was a perception of tutor indifference towards students' needs in classes. Additionally, most students indicated that tutors needed to avail themselves of some form of teacher education even at a minimal 'train the trainer' level. Students stated they were frequently bored with academics whose teacher skills were "appalling", which was also a recurrent theme in the open-ended feedback in the questionnaires. Students became frustrated with lecturers who were not available at the lecturer-set consultation times.

Assessment

As indicated in the quantitative data, all the students reported they had very real concerns with assessment. Feedback was identified as inadequate. There was a need for improved written feedback on all assignment work in order to better assist students to focus, read more effectively, and produce work of increased quality ... "just getting a tick on a piece of written work" provided them with no guidance on how to improve. The inclusion of marking keys or rubrics in each outline would assist students to produce higher quality work and reduce the time currently spent "guessing the expectations" tutors/lecturers had regarding levels of competence for each assessment task. First and third years, in particular, indicated that assessment guides should be openly and comprehensively discussed at the beginning of every unit by the academic staff member and the class. This would increase transparency in assessment practices and expectations. Students stated that it would enable them to take a more professional and assertive stance in engaging with their learning tasks, thereby adopting an 'achievement-oriented' learning approach.

Many in the focus groups felt that the assignments were not designed to assist their learning but was simply a process whereby the lecturer could give them a mark. They illustrated this by outlining the overuse of multiple choice tests and quizzes which they thought were in use because it made marking easier. They found these forms of assessment were set at a very low level and were only testing their factual knowledge not deeper concepts and understandings in the topics. The second and third years particularly enjoyed tasks that were authentic, which they described as directly related to the workplace and/or were going to be used by a real company or organisation. These tasks developed their motivation to engage and to lift their performance to a higher level. Research and innovative projects, assignments where they had choice and those that had a creative element were reported as the most desirable, however, they also stated that these were rare in their coursework.

Issues with group work

Group work emerged as a resounding problem from all students in all focus groups. This form of assessment was reportedly being overused. Students in the sample were largely disappointed by the reliance on group work by lecturers/tutors and saw it as a cynical exercise whereby staff marking loads could be reduced. Students stated that it was rare to have any lecturer outline how to undertake group work professionally or well. The first year group stated that some of the skills involved in the group work were identified and discussed but there was little follow up at the conclusion of the assignment to debrief the students' development of these skills. Almost all of the students outlined that academics rarely monitored the progress of groups, with many reporting that staff became impatient and irritated when the groups experienced problems being told to "go and work it out together. This is not my problem it yours!"

Distributing workload, roles and tasks were not always successful in group assignments. A strong theme was that time within the course must be set aside to teach students how to do sound group work, to assist students to develop appropriate time management strategies and to work with mixed groups (eg, different age groups, genders, and nationalities). Many students expressed feelings of resentment with having to undertake more than their fair share of the workload in group assessments due to "free loaders", "social loafers", and students who had poor English language skills. They strongly suggested that there was increased involvement by the tutor/lecturer with regard to ongoing monitoring of individual input and the facilitation of an oral defence by each group member at the conclusion of each assessment task. Others stated that peer review should be mandated in all group assignments so that those who had taken major roles in the task were able to report back on those whose contribution was less than satisfactory. Additionally, peer review processes should have "bite" in that marks were allocated to these reviews and that "free loaders" would have their marks reduced to reflect their poor or lesser contribution to the final outcomes. Many stated that the amount of work that was required to complete a satisfactory group assignment was not represented in the mark allocated to the task. One student outlined that his/her group had a major research task that was ongoing throughout the semester, required them to research an authentic product, design an instrument, collect data, analyse and write it up which was worth around 25% of the total mark. His/her comment was that there were inordinate amounts of hours undertaking this task for "a paltry 25% you have got to be kidding!" The mark needed to be better related to the amount of hours to do the task. Some of the more mature age students also reported considerable difficulties in meeting with the group members outside of class time. These students reported inconvenience and expense in obtaining additional childcare time to enable these group assessment meetings and activities.

The changing student demographic

Students stated that academics assumed they were only engaging in their studies on a full time basis as their only "work" commitment. The majority reported, however, that they had other paid employment which curtailed the time available for "group meetings". They outlined that they had to work at least 10-20 hours a week to cover their student fees alone. Some indicated that they had other costs such as rent, and other associated living costs, much less childcare payments, and books. The majority of the students (the international students were the exception) were regularly working anything between 10-48 hours in the week. Greater transparency of the workload was needed. Students appeared to be strategic about what they spent their time on, and what was going to yield the most desirable outcome, for example, some students were aiming for high distinction grades and were prepared to "go the extra miles" in terms of effort, while others with high workloads were aiming for a pass to be able to spend more time in paid and/or volunteer employment. Hence, academics who were implementing group assessments or who had unrealistic expectations for the amount of content to be covered, hours required to undertake readings, laboratory work, assignments, and study in their units needed to be aware of the difficulties they were making for students in terms of time management, accessing after-hours child minding, and role juggling.

Some of the more mature students were resentful at lecturers who did not make their expectations and the requirements of the unit and assessments explicit to students in unit outlines as these students “wasted precious time” attempting to ascertain these expectations. For these “time poor” students this was totally unacceptable. Clearer guidelines as to what constituted the outcomes for an “A”, “B”, “C” grade would be highly desirable.

It was clear from this open-ended feedback in focus group and the questionnaires, students felt that there was considerable work to be done by academics to make workload and assessment more fair, educative, balanced, transparent and explicit. They also indicated that the focus groups were a cathartic experience and emphatically hoped that their feedback would make a difference to their and other students’ university experiences in the future.

Where to from here?

As a result of these data the University’s teaching and learning committee has established a working party to recommend processes and practices to resolve some of the more significant issues that have emerged. This working party has representation across the entire university and is exploring curriculum review processes (*Tuning process*) within the Bologna agreement as a possible option to facilitate change and bring about increased transparency. Curriculum review is on the whole university agenda for 2007 and these data will inform the directions of the review. It is also obvious that many academics need further professional development and in-context support to engage with the teaching and learning issues that have been raised by students.

Conclusion

The aggregation of 104,000 responses over six years coupled with the collection of in depth focus group data afforded a rare opportunity for the researchers to glean consistent and reliable information regarding student perceptions about the teaching and learning process at the tertiary level. Both the qualitative and the quantitative data corroborate a disturbing lack of genuine appreciation in the past, by tertiary institutions, of the immense workload issues associated with the courses held in their charge, especially to students who have the extra responsibilities of work and family to cope with. Furthermore, student perceptions of frustration with assessment, its authenticity, relevance and especially the distribution of workloads in group work, point to the necessity of the consideration of new and effective strategies by academics to overcome these difficulties.

More specifically, academics must engage in the process of professional development to upgrade their pedagogical/androgogical knowledge and skills in line with current trends and take heed of the feedback and evaluation offered by instruments such as the CEQ to make changes. Review of programs in terms of structure, curriculum and the integration of professional skills through university support mechanisms for academic staff could enhance effectiveness. Offering formal qualifications such as a Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching seems one obvious solution; however this must take place in an atmosphere of shared goals, commitment, cooperation and the development of collegial networks which are dynamic, interactive and which ultimately lead to increasing the quality of student learning experiences, especially with regards to motivation, workload and assessment. To the credit of the academics who were the indirect subjects of this study, it would seem the atmosphere for positive transformation has been established.

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